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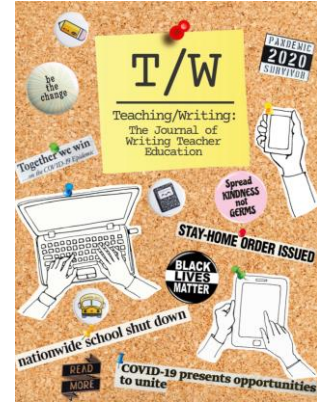
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Building Community in a Virtual Course

Kristen Hawley Turner, *Drew University*



In a one-year MAT program, building community among cohort members is crucial. From the first days of class, candidates need to develop trust with each other and their professors so that they can learn to be highly reflective practitioners who accept critical feedback.

For this reason, faculty in my program redesigned coursework to focus on community building in the first semester. As part of a course called Diversity in Families, Schools, and Communities, candidates would not only explore the diverse identities of students who would enter their classrooms in the future, but they would do so through the lens of learning about themselves and their cohort peers. The first year of implementation was successful, and we looked forward to welcoming the next cohort in May 2020.

Then, on March 17, 2020, the university decided that summer term courses would be held online, and I was faced with the task of building community among 24 new candidates without setting foot on campus or meeting each other in person. How could I reconfigure a team-building scavenger hunt across campus? How could I play get-to-know-you icebreakers? How could we create the community agreements that would allow us to have sometimes difficult conversations about race, culture, and prejudice in a Zoom classroom with 24 people?

These questions and more became my focus as I planned a two-week intensive institute that would replace the full-session course on diversity, and the prospect seemed overwhelming - until I remembered that as a writing teacher educator, I've been engaged in and building communities in virtual spaces for years. Approaching my course through this lens helped me to restructure face-to-face community building among candidates across certification areas into creating a virtual community of writers.

Setting the Context: Before the Course Began

In a face-to-face setting, candidates can work in both large and small groups on Day 1 in order to set the tone for the course and to begin building trust. However, in this summer's class, I needed them to feel comfortable entering a virtual space and have a purpose for sharing with a large group of people they did not know. In order to achieve this goal, I gave two pre-class assignments: the identity capsule and the buddy interview.

Identity Capsule

The identity capsule asked candidates to think back over their lives and across their various identities to answer the questions, “Who are you?” and “What do you want our community to know about you?” Each person selected 3-5 items that represented them, including at least one cultural artifact, and revealed those items with an explanation of each in a Flipgrid video of no more than three minutes. These short videos became capsules that began to reveal the identities of our community members, and I encouraged everyone to view the capsules of their peers and leave comments when they heard a connection or found something interesting. Candidates engaged with this task, and the grid had nearly 1200 views across all the videos prior to the course even starting.

Buddy Interview

Entering a classroom on the first day without knowing anyone can be intimidating. Entering a Zoom room in the same context can feel isolating. In order to give candidates the opportunity to know a face in the Zoom room and to give all community members an opportunity to speak for a purpose on Day 1, I assigned buddies from the class list and asked them to interview each other prior to the first class. The goal was for each person to introduce their buddy to the rest of the cohort in 60 seconds or less. I asked them to include the following in their introductions:

1. A generic fact about who this person is
2. The most interesting thing you learned about them
3. Something everyone in the cohort should know about them
4. (Optional) - your choice

Our first group activity, then, was pre-set, and as I listened to introductions, I heard many candidates saying, “We connected on...” or “We had this in common....” The buddies served other purposes during the course, including general support person (e.g., check in to see if your buddy is doing ok) and activity partner.

These two pre-class assignments set the stage for our community to interact with each other and to grow, even in a virtual setting.

Structuring Conversations: During the Course

Building trust in a community requires shared norms of how members interact and converse. In writing classrooms, I often use community agreements and protocols to build this trust, and I carried these practices into our virtual community this summer.

Establishing Community Agreements

On the first day of class, after introducing buddies, we engaged in a process of building community agreements. We began with 10 minutes of independent journaling (cameras and mics off) on the following prompt:

What do you need from every person in this group in order to feel safe, supported, open, productive and trusting... SO THAT we can do our best work and grow together?

Next, I moved the candidates into breakout rooms where they spent about 30 minutes brainstorming our community agreements. They used the Protocol for Sharing (Figure 1)

to structure their conversations, with each group member assuming one of four roles: facilitator, recorder, reporter, and community builder.

Protocol for Sharing

- Facilitator - Keeps time and on protocol
- Recorder - Takes notes and writes final agreements on shared document
- Reporter - Reads proposed agreements to whole group
- Community builder - Makes sure everyone's voice is heard



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Figure 1: Protocol for Sharing

Each recorder documented the group's notes on a Google document that was shared across all groups. After the reporters read out their groups' proposed agreements, I asked individuals to read through the entire document and make comments, especially looking for redundancies and omissions. We did this work during an extended break away from the Zoom room, and candidates choose when to pop into the Google doc and when to take a break.

Using the same roles and a new protocol, I broke students into small groups to discuss the following:

- What did you notice? (3 minutes)
- What do you recommend? (12 minutes)

With candidates in breakout rooms and me hanging out alone in the main Zoom room, I wasn't sure what to expect. My goal was to reconvene the entire group, having reporters share while I documented what I heard, coming to a final list of community agreements. However, as I watched the shared Google doc during the breakout room time, I was amazed at what happened. Candidates conversed across rooms in the comments of the document. Nearly all community members typed, reorganized, or revised the agreements. Someone began a "master list" at the top of the document, and people across rooms began cutting and pasting.

They spent longer than the allotted 15 minutes working collaboratively while I monitored their progress on the shared document. Later, through reading their daily reflections, I

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learned that all of this happened while each small group conversed. “We never stopped talking in our breakout room,” one candidate said.

Ultimately, the group did the work virtually and collaboratively, and we were able to approve our agreements unanimously by the end of our 2.5 hour class. (See Figure 2).

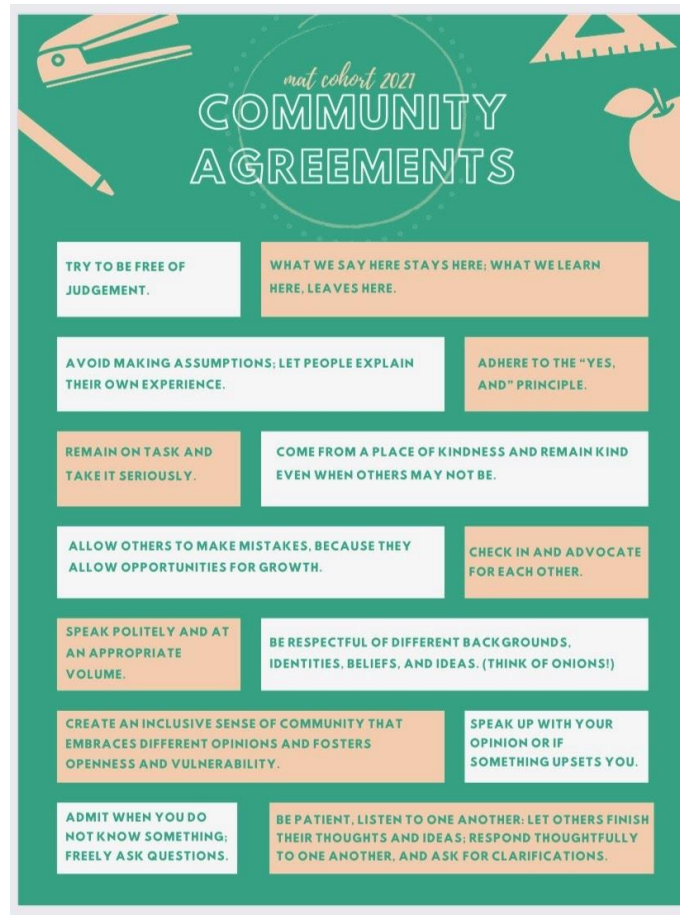


Figure 2: Drew MAT 2021 Cohort Community Agreements, image created by member Sami Strathern using Canva

These agreements formed the basis for our interactions and conversations throughout the course. When candidates reached out to me with concerns about how their group was functioning, we returned to the language of the agreements, which they were able to use to successfully resolve the problems.

Small Group Conversation

With 24 people in attendance, conversation in a Zoom meeting is not conversation at all. At best, it is a call and response atmosphere with very few cues as to when an individual can take their turn. However, small group conversations can work quite nicely in live hangouts, and as a teacher of writing, I have used writing groups successfully in virtual courses.

Writing groups are productive when all members of the group understand the purpose of and have a voice in the conversation. Applying this perspective to “conversation groups” allowed me to structure my course to build community among the cohort.

I assigned each candidate to two separate groups: (1) one focused on discussing course texts and content and (2) one focused on supporting the development of the major project. We used protocols for each of these purposes. For the content conversations, the candidates used (or adapted) [Save the Last Word for Me](#) (Averette, n.d.) and for feedback on the major project we used a Writer’s Memo model promoted by the National Writing Project. In this model, each author brought questions to the conversation for reader response. Readers provided critical feedback to help the writer move forward in the project.

Each day of the institute, the candidates met in each of these groups. Most synchronous meetings, then, took place with four people, not with the entire class. I checked in with each group through daily reflections, which helped me get to know each candidate and assess their progress through the course, and, in some cases, I met with them live to discuss their projects.

I deliberately assigned members of these groups so that individuals worked with different people across the course. By the time the intensive was complete, each candidate had deep and ongoing discussions with at least 7 others - 3 in the conversation groups, 3 in the project groups, and their assigned buddy. Despite never having met in person, they were able to build trust and community with cohort members.

Celebrating Selves: Finishing the Course

The major project in this course asked candidates to engage in auto-inquiry and to share their self-discoveries with their small groups. The final day of the course focused on a celebration of selves. Each small group met to share their writing. Some had created digital stories; some children’s books. Others shared more traditional memoirs. All were open, honest, and trusting.

The work we had done to build community allowed for raw emotion to come through in their publications. As one student wrote in his final reflection,

This class gave me the opportunity to briefly share some personal stories with peers. Sharing my stories was honestly liberating, and made me feel a greater

connection to my classmates. As classmates shared their stories, I grew comfortable enough to share mine.

This culmination of the community building that had begun even before the first day of class demonstrated that building communities in a completely virtual setting is more than feasible. By approaching the design process as if I were building a community of writers, I was able to facilitate opportunities for candidates to know each other, to disagree and agree with each other, and to build trust with all members of the community.

Reflections

Throughout the course, candidates had the opportunity to share with and listen to all the members of their cohort. Through their conversation groups, Flipgrid videos, and randomized breakout room activities, each of the class members interacted with every other person. I learned about them through their daily reflections, which culminated in a final self-assessment. I also asked for feedback twice on the conversation group work, where I was less involved than in the project development groups.

From these surveys and their reflective writing/vlogs, I could trace the development of the community. Candidates regularly referenced things their peers said in a small group conversation that changed their thinking or pushed them forward. They acknowledged when the community worked well and when it needed attention. I intervened when needed, which was rare as they learned to use the community agreements and protocols to do important work in building trust and respect among members.

By the end of the course, we truly were a community. As one student wrote in her final assessment:

I feel that when the time comes that we can all see each other in class in person, it will feel like we actually know each other and classes will be united through the bonds we have created from our learning experiences now.

For this cohort in particular, these bonds are important, as they will form the basis of a support network for these novice teachers as they enter an unknown and unfamiliar landscape. The tools they gained in practicing their own community development this summer may help them in navigating remote and socially distanced teaching contexts in the coming year.

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Averette, P. (n.d.) Save the last word for me. National School Reform Faculty. Harmony education Center. Accessed online: https://www.nsrffharmony.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/save_last_word_0.pdf